

DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES AND HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS

**A SHAMANIC JOURNEY
IN SEARCH OF COMMON GROUND**

A Talk By:

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INTRODUCTION

Thanks for the invitation to participate in this conference on Primary Health Care and to speak to you this afternoon.

You have asked me to speak about "**DISCOVERING THE COMMON GROUND FOR DEVELOPING COMMUNITIES AND HEALTH CARE SYSTEMS.**" This title says three things to me.

First, it says that there is no consensus among us about how we should develop communities or how we should develop health care systems.

There are gaps between the feds and the territorial government, between the political level and senior staff, between headquarters and regions, between regions and local health care providers, between aboriginal groups and non-aboriginal groups, between government and non-profits. There seem to be gaps all over the place.

There are a lot of reasons for these gaps. They have much to do with decentralization, fiscal restraint, government re-structuring, the emergence of non-profit agencies, the settling of land claims, the emergence of aboriginal self-government, the impact of the current resource development boom in the Western Arctic that is, on the one hand, creating a greater demand for services and, on the other, distracting our attention away from providing them. But the gaps are real and they are impeding our ability to achieve consensus.

The second thing the title says to me is that our fates are intertwined--those of us who are developing communities and those of us who are developing health care systems. We are moving into the future together. *We are either going to succeed together or we are going to fail together.* But we are joined at the hip. We can't develop our communities without developing our health care systems. We can't develop our health care systems without developing communities.

The third thing the title says to me is that we have to discover and develop a new common ground. We need a new foundation on which to build a future together. My sense is that the old place--whatever it was--no longer provides a firm footing. People are no longer sure where they stand, or what

they are standing upon, or what their roles are, or where they are going and how they are going to get there. So we need to develop a new common ground which is probably the reason for this conference and why you've asked me to speak on "Discovering the Common Ground for Developing Communities and Health Care Systems."

The theme I'm going to develop in this talk I can summarize in a single sentence. It's part of my belief statement. ***"Those who want to discover common ground must start by recognizing that they are standing on it."***

In a word, our common ground is the Earth--Nature--and the way it develops. Communities and health care systems are life-forms, organisms. They are part of a living universe, a living planet. They develop the same way Nature develops--according to the same developmental principles. The better we understand how nature develops, the better we will understand how we can help our communities and our health care systems develop.

Marshall McLuhan once said, "I don't know who it was that first discovered water, but I'm sure it wasn't a fish." His point was, of course, that we are not aware of our environments. We take them for granted. A fish will only discover the water when it is flopping around on the dock and saying to itself, "Geez, isn't there supposed to be water around here or something." The point?

It's difficult to get outside our traditional ways of thinking. They have become part of us. For almost a century we have thought of organizations as machines. This has been our legacy from the Industrial Economy. We have then superimposed our machine model on communities. They have become places on a map with set services, administrations, systems, policies, --all controlled by legislation that is under the control of someone outside the community. We tend to evaluate levels of development in a Hamlet in terms of the systems we ourselves introduce--do they make regular reports, pass audits, have 5-year Capital Plans, and so forth? But these aren't the true indicators of development. If I ask my friend Fr. Pochat, who has worked 30 years among the Dogrib, about the level of development in a particular Dogrib community, he will talk to me about the number of people who have gone through a healing process, or are now in the midst of a healing process--but I am getting ahead of myself.)

In an information age, with its instant global communications and continual rapid change, this rigid model with its rigid structures no longer meets our needs. We need a new way of thinking about organizations and systems and communities. And the way that is emerging is to think of them as organisms or life-forms.

But how do we learn to do this? That's the real challenge in trying to create Common Ground.

In this talk I am going to ask you to come with me on a shamanic Journey down into *The Land of Organisms and Life Forms*.

- The first thing we are going to do is talk about the Shaman who is going to lead us--and why we have chosen a Shaman.
- The second thing we are going to do is take the journey with the Shaman as our guide.
- The third thing we are going to do is try and translate what we learn about organisms into practical suggestions that we can bring back to help us develop our communities and health care systems. Our particular concern is, of course, Primary Health Care.

1. THE SHAMAN

As I just mentioned, we have to learn to get outside ourselves, to think in a different way. The real experts at getting outside oneself are the shamans--spirit figures with special powers that somehow can get in contact with Spirit world. Shamans have existed in our part of the world for thousands of years.

The way shamans get outside the limitations of their own frames is to take shamanic journeys. They can travel high up into the galaxies or down into the nether world--the world where life begins, where species share common origins. On their journeys they transcend time, space and distance.

Some of the shamans are shape-shifters. They can change their form and take on the form of an animal or of another person. This power makes it easier for them to move around in the places they visit. For our journey

today we are selecting a modern shaman. He understands the traditional ways and can shape-shift into animal species or a human member of the community. But he can also shape-shift into a modern service provider and pass freely among public servants and caregivers in organizational life-forms. He's some talented fellow, this Shaman of ours.

There are two particular reasons why we have chosen a modern shaman as our guide down into The Land of Organisms and Life-forms.

First, though shamans have many powers, their primary power is as healers. As one of our great experts on shamans, Mircea Eliade has told us, there are two kinds of sickness: physical sickness and spiritual sickness--the loss of soul. The Shaman is a specialist in the latter. He sets off to find the lost soul or spirit and return it to its owner.

I don't know about you, but as I move around communities in the North and in and out of government departments or service organizations I am often aware of a deep sense of loss of soul. Many people seem beaten down, burned out, discouraged, unsure of what their role is or how to carry it out. There is almost a sense of hopelessness at times. And it is not only at the community level. It happens within bureaucracies at all levels--so who cares for the caregivers?

The second reason for choosing the Shaman as our guide is his strong sense of mission. The Shaman exists for the community. The purpose of his journeys is to acquire new knowledge and experience, to establish new relationships with other spirits, and to bring back this knowledge and these new relationships to benefit the community. God knows we need new ideas and new ways of understanding this world in which we find ourselves. And somehow our quest to discover common ground between communities and health care systems is very much about developing new working relationships.

And so we chose a modern shaman as our guide--and we now meet him.

2. THE JOURNEY

The Shaman invites us to pause for a moment, reflect upon the journey we are about to undertake and prepare our individual spirits to meet with other

spirits that we will encounter in *The Land of Organisms and Life Forms*. He then begins to move--and move quickly.

As we follow him we have a strong sense that we are falling--a psychic sense that we are travelling down through the layers of our own existence. We quickly pass through the frame of our personal experience, down through our family coding, down through the realities of our cultural coding, down through the institutional coding of our workplaces, We finally come to a soft landing in *The Land of Organism and Life-forms*. It's a very weird and strange place. We sense that this is the place where life begins--we have arrived at the source of our own genetic coding, where our DNA has its origins. We are in a sub atomic world surrounded by atoms and molecule electrons, protons and quarks, and waves and particles of all kinds.

As we get our bearings, we realize that we are surrounded by organisms and life forms all in various stages of development. And there are two things that strike us immediately.

First everything is in a state of flux, everything is continually changing. And second, everything is in relationship with something else and everything else. The whole of existence is organisms in relationship--creating relationships, maintaining relationships, dissolving relationships and moving on to form new relationships. And everything is interconnected.

We have a strong sense that we, too, are in relationship with all other species and with the earth itself. We can see now that we share a similar DNA with species that were our ancestors. We realize that the salt water that makes up most of our bodies is part of the Earth's irrigation system. And the minerals that make up the rest of our body are the same minerals as those that make up the crust of the earth--minerals that have come from the explosion that created our solar systems and planet 4 billion years ago. This is a real rush.

The Shaman gives us a little while to be overwhelmed by all the movement and relationship building and then he speaks,

SHAMAN: *"Observe the life-forms and organisms. Can you see any common tendencies or patterns that all these life forms exhibit as they develop?"*

At first we can see nothing--but then, the Shaman shares with us his psychic vision, and, sure enough we can detect three dominant development patterns. First, we notice that all of the organisms and life-forms, from the very moment of their existence, begin to *differentiate* themselves from every other organism. The human body starts out as a single fertilized egg. But then the cells differentiate into brain cells, lung cells, kidney cells, cells of the central nervous systems, foot cells and so forth. And this tendency to differentiate is consistent across all forms of existence. Galaxies differentiate themselves, so do species and peoples and communities and cultures. Aboriginal people are differentiated from people of European ancestry; Inuit peoples from Dene peoples, Dogrib people from Cree and Metis peoples. Nature, it seems, hates mono-cultures but loves diversity.

The second thing we notice is that all life-forms have some type of *consciousness or self-awareness*, in different degrees and according to different modes of being. The Earth has its own mode of being and it seems to have a psychic awareness of its own existence, as do all other species and organisms. Life-forms manifest this consciousness through their ability to self-organize. The rapidly expanding universe self-organizes, so does the Earth with its changing seasons and cycles for the migration of species. So do the various organisms and social structures, and even the stock market self-organizes. It is this ability to self-organize that manifests life and guides the nature of development.

The third characteristic that seems common to all development is *communion*. All organisms enter into and sustain mutually enhancing relationships. These relationships create dependencies among organisms. Each organism is continually interacting with its local environment. The local environment--which is other organisms-- is continually inter-acting with the organism-- and yet things seem to hold together within some kind of self-imposed boundaries. It is the communion that exerts some influence over differentiation-and vice versa.

As we watch this relationships building we become profoundly aware that all development is co-development. The horse can't develop if the grasses don't develop; the fish can't develop unless the nutrients in the lake develop;

the child won't develop unless the family develops. The company won't develop unless its customer base develops, the economy won't develop unless the markets develop; the health care system won't develop unless the community, which is part of the system, also develops.

As a group we share our findings about the patterns of differentiation, self-awareness and communion with the Shaman. Then he speaks to us.

THE SHAMAN: *"You have just recognized what, in your world, you would call the strategic framework for all of existence. These three principles are not only the context within which life occurs--they are also the driving forces behind all development. All existence--from galaxies, to the earth, to the single cell organism--develop according to the principles of differentiation, self-awareness and communion. So do communities. So do health care systems.*

So now that you have seen the broad context of life, let us observe more closely the life-forms around us. You will learn more, and understand more if you try to think like an organism."

The Shaman now sends us off in little groups to wander around, observe, take notes and to report back to the group as a whole. So that's what we do. And when we return we compare notes, have heated discussion, but eventually come up with what one person calls "***The Six Down To Earth Principles of Life-form Development.***" So here they are.

The Six "Down to Earth Principles" of Organism Development

1. **Go with what works.** Organisms are very practical. The fundamental concern of all organisms is their own survival--and they survive by continually anticipating the future in some way. They experiment. They do this is by taking signals from their past and bringing them forward to modify their future. (Systems folks call these signals "feedback loops."). When organisms are ready for development they put out feelers to new levels. If the feedback is positive, they move; if it isn't they try something else. But they always move from one stage to another by building on what works. What organisms don't do is develop long range plans with imaginary long-term strategic objectives or possible scenarios.

2. **Respect the nature and pace of development.** Organisms always build from the ground up. They take signals from their local environment and move from where they are to places of greater levels of complexity. They always develop at their own pace and the pace of development differs among organisms, even similar organisms. Thus, to use a local example, the Yellowknife, Inuvik and Fort Smith Health Boards may all find themselves at different stages of development. They develop at their own pace. They don't follow some development criteria that are imposed upon them from the outside. They don't follow 5-year strategic plans, or 3-year budget cycles, or one year operational plans that are superimposed *unilaterally* by a central authority. When they try to do this they often fail.

3. **Build capacity.** Survival depends upon an organism's ability to grow and develop. They do this in one of two ways. Either they build capacity within themselves by acquiring new skills and resources they need to develop. Or they build capacity by entering into symbiotic relationships--mutually enhancing relationships with different organisms. (Nature is full of such relationships: the pilot fish that attach themselves to sharks to clean out harmful bacteria, the bird that cleans the teeth of the hippopotamus, and so forth.) As we already stated, all development requires co-development. But the main point about capacity-building is this. Organisms always build upon what already exists. They start from where they are at, not from where someone else would like them to be.

4. **Respect self-organization.** What organism need is order not control. And most of that order comes from the organisms itself through its ability to self-organize. It only exercises control when it is threatened. (The antibodies rush to fight the infection). An important point--the focal points for self-organization are distributed throughout the system--even in complex adaptive systems. There is no central control mechanism, no central brain, no deputy minister or CEO, no Queen Bee that determines how order will develop. As organism become more complex the order functions are further distributed throughout the system in individual cells and units.

5. **Learn to tolerate chaos.** As organisms develop they continually experiment. This often creates disturbances and what seems to be confusion. But as the Nobel Prize Winner Ilya Prigogine has pointed out, order seems to emerge out of chaos. When things are stable or in a state of equilibrium, there is no development. This is true of single cell organisms, caterpillars that change into butterflies, teenagers and institutions. The only way organisms can develop is to pass through periodic transitions. These can be turbulent--but some turbulence is normal

6. **Learn to recognize the manifestations of Spirit.** All organisms seem to have the capacity to manifest life or Spirit through four basic functions. These are distributed throughout the system. We can see these most clearly in human organizations.
 - The ability to discern, animate and channel Spirit--THE LEADERSHIP FUNCTION.
 - The ability to care for and restore Spirit--THE HEALING FUNCTION
 - The ability to protect and safeguard Spirit--THE PROTECTOR/GUARDIAN FUNCTION
 - The ability to acquire knowledge and pass it on to future generations--THE LEARNER/TEACHER FUNCTION.

When we finished our work the Shaman re-appeared. We made our report and he smiled. We could tell he was pleased. Then he spoke

3. WHAT WE LEARNED

SHAMAN: *"You set out on this journey to the Land of Organisms and Life-forms to discover the common ground between the development of communities and the development of health care systems--so that both could develop together. You have done well. You have discovered a strategic framework around the principles of differentiation,*

consciousness and communion. You have created your "Six Down to Earth Principles" to guide you in your day to day operations.

You must now bring your knowledge and wisdom back for the benefit of your communities and health care systems. So what have you learned in your journey through The Land of Organisms and Life-forms? What will you tell people back in your communities and in your systems?"

We thought for a moment about our journey. Then one by one people began to speak.

- "Let's start thinking about the wholes--not the parts. Everything in the universe is inter-related. The health care system is a single, inter-related system that includes headquarters, regions, local communities, nursing stations, social services, non-profit agencies, housing services and the people we are serving. They are all part of the same system. We cannot make changes in one part of the system--say at the headquarters level or the community level--without impacting on all parts of the system."
- "Let's re-think the nature of communities. A community is not *really* a place on a map. It is *really* a network of relationships. Let's place the emphasis back on the relationships. Let's go back to the traditional aboriginal definition: "A community is an intimate relationships with all living things, both animate and inanimate. A human community is part of an Earth community."
- "Let's re-think what a healthy community is. It is not just a community with good services. It's a community where people have an intimate relationship...
 - with the Spirit of the land (their primordial relationship)
 - with their own inner Spirit,
 - with the Spirit of their families, neighbours and culture,
 - with the Spirit of their organizations.

Let's place the emphasis back on the relationships. The services are important--but they are only a mean to an end."

- "Let's re-think what we mean by Primary Health Care. It is not just the point of entry into an array of services--health promotion,

disease prevention, assessment, diagnosis, treatment and so forth. If a developed community is a healthy community--one in which people develop healthy relationships--then perhaps we should define Primary Health Care. Perhaps it is *the means by which we help individuals develop healthy relationships and assume responsibility for their own health, their families health, the health of their communities and the health of their local environment.*"

- "Let's recognize people as part of the health care system. In stead of thinking of them as clients, consumers or the receptors of services, let's start thinking of them as caregivers--because that's what they are."
- "Maybe we should all put a sign up in our offices, "**All Development is Co-Development.**" We cannot develop one part of a system, without a corresponding development in other parts of the system. For example, at the community level, we cannot improve health care services without, at the same time, addressing the problems of overcrowded housing and poor sanitation. It's just a waste of money and resources." Let's stop thinking in terms of the parts and start thinking in terms of the whole."
- "Let's place the emphasis back on effectiveness--doing the right things--and put less emphasis on efficiency--doing the right thing in the right way. For example, let's ask the hard question. Is government going to assume a greater role in capacity building? Is that the "right thing" for government in this new environment? Or is its role only to provide services and resources? If it is not government's role, whose role is it? Once we answer those questions, we can talk about efficiency--the how. If capacity building is of the essence of government, how will it do this? Will it hire more capacity builders and less service providers? Will it turn service providers into capacity builders?"
- "Let's stop emphasizing what we can't do--and start emphasizing what we can do. We are having successes, many successes. Let's be like organisms. Let's identify our successes and build on what works. Let's share them with the rest of the network. Let's also

build upon our individual and group strengths, not on our limitations.

- “Let's sort out our corporate priorities. Let's skip large scale evaluations done by expensive consultants, developing fancy multi-coloured manuals that no one reads, carrying out constant corporate re-organizations, creating information systems that are atomic fly-swatters and developing expensive strategic plans that have a beard on them the day they are born so they never get implemented. Instead, let's teach people how to monitor activities, read and analyze feedback, become sensitive to small changes in their environments, plan for the short-term, make regular adjustments to procedures, and relate to one another. And let's Let's stop building more and more governance structures just because we think we know how to do it. We are already the most over-governed people on the continent.”
- "Let's learn to respect the reality of self-organization. Let's accept a certain amount of chaos as inevitable--as a sign of growth. Let's stop panicking and trying to control everything. Most of the time communities and systems don't need control. What they need is order. And there is a difference. With hundreds of people sitting in front of computers everyday and wandering around communities--all of them interacting with other people and with the information coming across their screens--well there is very little we can control. Let's make sure to tell our Government Ministers that they really aren't in control of their departments. (That's straightforward enough--and perhaps career threatening.) And let's stop that huge sucking sound we hear during the weeks before the Legislative Assembly sits--the sound of all available human energy being sucked up and wasted on developing those godawful briefing books.”
- “Let's acknowledge and honour the signs of life and spirit that are all around us. Last week the Gwich'in, Inuvialuit, and the folks in the Beaufort-Delta achieved an agreement in principle on Self-government--the first such agreement. But it took them 8 years with another three or four years to go to a final agreement. It should never take that long. Let's fast track these processes. Self-government is one of our most consistent feedback loops.”

- “Let’s abandon the advocacy techniques of land claims and start negotiating in terms of cooperation and co-development.”
- “If the key slogan for business is "Location, location, location," the key word for Primary Health Care is "network, network, network. And to build the networks the key word is going to have to be "trust, trust, trust." Let's start building more of it.”
- “Let's care for the caregivers--and help them to heal.”
- “Let's realize that the work we are all doing is essentially Spirit work. For most people who do what we do, work is not a job-- it is a vocation--a calling. In a confused and rapidly changing North we have to learn the new skills: to discern, animate and channel Spirit, to protect and guard Spirit, to foster the Spirit of learning, and perhaps most important of all for those in our profession, to call up and share the Spirit of healing.”

We finished with sort of a flourish. The Shaman said nothing for a bit. Then he smiled, and just nodded his head in agreement. After another slight pause, he said, "I want to leave you with a gift, a memento of our journey through The Land of Organisms and Life-forms, a reminder of where you have come from and where you will return to."

He looked down at the earth and began to speak softly.

"Oh Great Spirit, our Creator
 All over the world the faces of living ones are alike,
 With tenderness they have come up out of the ground.
 Look upon your children,
 That they may face the winds
 And walk the good road to the Day of Quiet.
 Fill us with the Light,
 Give us the Strength to understand, and the eyes to see
 Teach us to walk the soft Earth as relatives to all that live.”

(Adapted from the Lakota Prayer in *Earth Prayers*)

Thank you.

MIKE BELL

Mike Bell is a management consultant specializing in communications, group animation and community and organizational development. He's honed his skills as a public speaker, writer, trainer and group animator in a wide variety of work environments.

After spending a dozen years with a Roman Catholic monastic community, Mike worked as a priest in New York City and Baltimore. He gave retreats, served as a chaplain in jails and hospitals, and worked in various inner-city poverty programs. In the late 60s he went to Paris, France where he served as a student chaplain on a large campus for international students. He worked with students during the student riots that broke out in May of 1968.

In the 70s, Mike worked as a community organizer on Milwaukee's East Side counter-culture community, as a consultant with an architectural firm in Vancouver, and as an administrator for two community health centres in northern British Columbia. In 1980 Mike moved to Baffin Island in the Eastern Arctic and worked for three years as the Superintendent of Social Services for the Government of the Northwest Territories. In 1983 he became the Director of Policy, Training and Information Systems for the Department of Social Services in Yellowknife and, in 1985, worked as senior consultant for the NWT Housing Corporation.

In 1986 he set up his own consulting firm, **Inukshuk Management Consultants**, in Yellowknife. Since then he's worked with many government departments, private companies, aboriginal organizations, and community organizations both in the North and in the western provinces. In 1989, as Project Coordinator for the Government of the Northwest Territories' Special Committee on the Northern Economy, he wrote *THE SCONE REPORT*.

Mike is an expert group animator and trainer. He runs small-groups workshops and focus group sessions using his storyboarding technique. He also works with large groups (30-100 participants) and runs Future Search and Open Space Conferences. Most of these are community-based planning activities to develop community visions, wellness strategies and economic development strategies. In recent years, Mike's has spent most of his time doing community development work in northern aboriginal communities. He provides foundation workshops and organizational retreats in community development, strategic planning, board development, leadership training and teambuilding. He also provides a variety of communication workshops.

Mike has an M.A in Communications from the University of Wisconsin, and an M.A. in Theology from St. Paul's University in Ottawa. He has done postgraduate work in communications and theology in a number of universities in the U.S. and France.

Mike welcomes any comments or feedback that readers might have on this talk.

